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INDIANA COLLECTION
steel -- U.S. Steel

THE 1919 STEEL STRIKE

The 1919 steel strike against the United Steel Corporation at Gary Steel Works began on September 22nd. Prime negotiators for the Corporation were headed by Chairman of the Board Judge Elbert H. Gary. At the time, the total employment of the entire Corporation was around 275,000, and about 30,000 at Gary Steel Works alone.

Negotiating for the rank and file were two unions - the larger American Federation of Labor headed by English born Samuel Gompers who helped to organize the A.F. of L. in 1881, and the smaller Industrial Workers of the World commonly referred to as the I.W.W. or "Wobblies". The I.W.W. claimed that it is labor that produces and not capital, therefore capital must be overthrown.

The opportune time for the setting of the strike was at hand - the unrest after the World War and the return of the military to civilian life; the "buzz" word that the steel industry was "Open Shop"; that common labor in the mills was primarily of alien ethnic birth and very easily influenced by inflammatory rhethoric. However, it is well to point out at this point that native born workers and the naturalized citizens were loyal to the company.

The sequence of events leading to the walkout - in July the organizers claimed 98% of the workers favored a strike unless the following 12 union demands were not met:

1. Collective bargaining
2. Reinstate discharged workers for union activities
3. An 8-hour work day
4. One day of rest in seven
5. Abolish the 24-hour shifts
6. Increase wages to the standard of living
7. Standard scale of wages for trades and classification of workers
8. Pay for overtime, holiday, and Sunday work
9. Check-off system for collecting union dues
10. Principles of seniority to apply
11. Abolish company unions
12. Abolish physical exams for workers

About the middle of August organizers announced they would strike in two weeks if no acceptance of their 12 demands was reached. On August 26th a polite refusal was received from Judge Gary outlined in a letter. The strike began September 22nd. In general, the strike was bloodless, but there were some notable exceptions. This is attributed to the fact of prompt action by local public authorities, and the refusal by the Company to bring in strike breakers.

By the end of September the strike lessened and by Oct. 6th the labor leaders realized they were engaged in a losing battle and was dead for all practical purposes long before the end of the year. By the middle of January the strike was called off.

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(UNITED STATES STEEL by Arunder Cotter, 1921)
"A Corporation with a Soul"